The most recent findings from the Global Burden of Disease project confirm the significant impact of mental health and substance use problems. Indeed, some have described poor mental health as the non-communicable disease of the first half of the life course.

Mental health is unequivocally a major public health issue. Yet most people with such problems never receive help. This level of unmet need is particularly stark among those struggling with substance abuse problems. Indeed, if all people likely to benefit from support and/or intervention “turned up” our systems would collapse under the demand.

Research clearly tells us that most adult disorders are in fact juvenile disorders grown up. This implies that potentially up to 50% of the adult burden associated with these problems could be averted if effective interventions were applied during the juvenile years. Despite this knowledge, approximately two-thirds of mental health budgets are typically directed towards adult sufferers. The newest research reveals that mental health and substance problems are essentially the expression of several underlying vulnerabilities and that these bear little relation to the categories enshrined in DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) or ICD (International Classification of Diseases) systems. Moreover, these neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities are identifiable in the earliest years of life.

Threading this together, a future workforce seeking to effectively pre-empt or ameliorate symptoms and promote recovery needs to be well-resourced and trained (given the high levels of need); focussed and able to deliver interventions earlier in the natural history of the problems (e.g., adolescence); and committed to serious preventive efforts, beginning in utero, given that substances have a seriously toxic effect upon developing brains.

Translation of evidence into daily practice need not take decades. Success might entail acquiring new skills, and new ways of practicing, for example, by adopting massively scalable, high-fidelity and sophisticated e-interventions for mental health problems. Harnessing and harmonising the skills of more of the helping professions must also be explored.

The need to innovate is obvious; but with this comes the responsibility to rigorously evaluate new approaches to ensure we are truly making a difference. This edited volume is a valuable step in the right direction.

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